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SDSU Extension Fact Sheets

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Know Your Community

Cooperative Extension, South Dakota State University

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Cooperative Extension Service

Better Local Activities From

Knowing Your Community

Know Your Community

Do you really know your community, your county, the area in which you live? For example: What is the cost of local taxes per pupil in your school district? How does this compare to the state average? How many pre-school boys and girls are there in the district?

Facts are essential for sound group action. Start with a small area such as a town and its surrounding trade area, a township, school district, a watershed, or a county. Facts are most readily available by counties or townships, as political subdivisions, and for many purposes they are most useful. Facts are also available by observing the census; county tax records; county soil, land use, and other surveys.

In every area there is a wealth of knowledge already available without undertaking new research. Unfortunately, this information is seldom assembled in any one place. If it is put together, an overall picture of the area can be used as a basis for wise community planning and action. All county, state, and federal governmental officials can provide many facts. Local Chambers of Commerce, civic and service groups, churchmen, school officials, businessmen, power suppliers, and many others are also sources of information.

In most areas this is the task to be done, through an organized "Know your Community" effort. It can be a gratifying learning experience for those who participate and the starting line for area economic development. To know the situation is the starting point for community planning and action.

WHAT FACTS ARE NEEDED?

Information needed depends on the purpose of the study, but the following are helpful to understanding the problems and opportunities of any geographic area.

1. Land

Area—space in acres, square miles, etc.

Geographic location of the area in relation to centers of consumption, recreation, special sources of water, fuel, highways, etc.

Climatic conditions

Soils, topography, geology

Water, drainage, streams, lakes, underground sources, etc.

Use of land, surface cover—trees, crops, etc.

Farm size, tenure, ownership, location.

It is surprising the new picture one can get of an area from a series of rather simple maps, showing this type of basic information.

2. People

Population density, location of residence—farm, rural non-farm, seasonal, town.

Ethnic and religious characteristics of the people, location of churches.

Age and sex distribution, location of school age groups—elementary, secondary.

Employment, occupations, commuting pattern.

Level of living, education, income of area population in comparison to state.

Productive labor supply—skills, number, source, rates, availability, etc.

Organizations and key leadership.

3. Capital

Major land improvements, rural and urban—parks, meeting facilities, accommodations, industrial sites.

Service improvements to land—transportation, drainage, water supply, communications, etc.

Structures—factories, barns, homes, stores, schools, etc.

Finance, credit availability, and rates.

Equipment, machinery, tools, etc.

Market structures and organizations.

Organization and availability of financing for de-

velopment, assistance to prospective employers, etc.

4. Institutions

Religious, fraternal, social, civic groups and their functions.

Commercial, business, industrial, agricultural, and labor organizations.

Local government and influences, taxation, services, costs, and assessments.

Schools—location, facilities, number of pupils, bus routes, costs, quality of education, etc.

State government services and influences.

Federal government services and influences.

Inter-governmental relations.

5. The Element of Change—Trends

Historical development of the area.

Local factors giving rise to change.

Outside factors giving rise to change.

Changes in land use, ownership, managerial units, land values, land costs, productivity, prices, competition, marketing, etc.

Changes in population density, characteristics, place of residence, employment, occupations, income, etc.

Changes in institutions, public services, transportation, communications, centralization or decentralization, etc.

Influence of catastrophes, of innovations, of improved production techniques.

Apparent direction and nature of changes taking place that will influence development.

ASSEMBLING FACTS

Catalog and reduce facts to simple statements and

map as: "There are 400 men and women over 70 years of age living in the county" and a map showing where they live. Avoid general narrative descriptions. Use the people who know the most about the subject to get the pertinent facts together. If it's a school bus route to be mapped, for example, the county school commissioner, superintendent, and bus drivers can be most helpful. To get cost of various county services, roads, or welfare, the county commissioners are an excellent source of information.

For specific purposes of community action on specific problems, other special information is often essential. New facts may have to be compiled through surveys, interviews, or questionnaires. Once a specific problem or possible opportunity has been identified, fact finding can be directed at a single purpose and professional assistance may be used to a real advantage.

DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Out of knowledge solutions are found, new ideas generated, development becomes a reality. There is no short cut to wise community action. Because one has lived a lifetime in an area is no assurance he has a true picture of its realities. An organized fact finding "Know your Community" study by those citizens concerned with its future has been proven the stepping stone to progressive development.

The learning process, the understanding, and the ideas generated are as valuable as the facts themselves.

By substituting facts for fancies, citizens can rise above the myopia of ignorance, prejudice, special self-interest, and isolated provincialism, to assume their rightful role in determining their future and the future of the community, state, and nation.